

A close-up photograph of two pencils with red and black barrels and sharpened wooden tips, resting on a sheet of lined paper. The pencil on the right has a single, dark drop of ink falling from its tip. The background is slightly blurred, showing a keyboard on the left.

Student Bodies

QUICKREADS

JANET LORIMER



Jake Maguire emptied the dustpan into the trash can. Then he glanced around the big room.

From 8:00 to 5:00 the community college lounge was packed with day students, talking and laughing. But this time of night there were only a few students sitting at the tables. Most of them were quite a bit older and more serious than the daytime crowd.

Jake was glad there was less mess to clean up in the evenings. But he missed the lively presence of kids his own age.

“Hey, Maguire, get back to work!”

Jake jumped a foot. Old Ted Flannery—the head janitor—had a bad habit of sneaking up

behind his assistants and scaring them. As if his weird black clothes and greasy black hair weren't scary enough!

Jake turned and glared at the old man. "I'm on it, okay?"

Ted chuckled. "Start cleaning those tables now. You know the drill: First wash them, and then wax them. I want this place spotless for tomorrow."

"Yeah, yeah," Jake muttered. He took the broom and dustpan to the janitor's closet.

While he filled a pail with water, Jake thought about how suddenly his life had changed for the worse.



Until a few weeks ago, Jake had thought his life was going great. He had a good job—the same one he'd held all through high school. His boss was all for kids going to college. He was glad to let Jake arrange his work schedule around his classes.

The day he registered for college, Jake had been lucky. He got all the classes he needed

and he met Yolanda Melendez. To Jake, Yolanda seemed to be as perfect as any girl could be. She had a great sense of humor and the prettiest smile he'd ever seen. Best of all, she shared many of Jake's interests.

As luck would have it, they found they'd enrolled in the same French course. It was his only night class. He and Yolanda had agreed to study their French lessons together.

Then, just a couple of weeks later, Jake's whole world fell apart. First, his boss went out of business. That meant Jake needed another job right away. He'd been relieved to find the janitor's job on campus. But he'd had to drop out of the French class.

Jake was disappointed. But at least Yolanda had promised to study in the student lounge, so they could talk on his breaks.

So where was she? For the last couple of nights, there'd been no sign of her! Jake had called her cell phone several times but gotten no answer. Was she sick? Or maybe studying for a test? Or worse, had she met some other guy she liked better? Jake sure

hoped she'd show up tonight. He was getting worried.



Jake tried to get his mind off Yolanda. He had to get those tables cleaned so he could go home.

He was polishing a table when the lights flickered. Jake glanced up. For some reason, he felt a chill. Was he imagining things, or had the temperature dropped? And why had the room suddenly become so quiet?

Glancing over his shoulder, Jake noticed a group of strange-looking people coming in. Several guys and a couple of girls stood in the doorway, looking around the room. They seemed to be searching for something—or someone.

Again, Jake felt a sudden chill. There was something very odd about this group—but he couldn't put his finger on it. Maybe it was that they were all dressed in black. Or maybe it was that they carried no books or backpacks. No—it was the strange look in

their eyes. How could he explain it? It was a *hungry* look.

Get a grip, man! Back to work, Jake told himself. But he watched as they grabbed a table in the shadows at the back of the room. Sitting there, they stared at the other students intently. Jake could actually feel their cold, intense gaze. He hoped those creeps would be gone by the time he got to their table.

All of a sudden a big crowd of students poured into the lounge. Jake glanced at the clock. The last class had just ended. In a half-hour, the snack bar would close.

Jake spotted Ted frowning at him. If he didn't hurry, the old man would have his hide. He started to polish tables as fast as he could.

He was just finishing up when Ted flicked the lights off and on several times. That was the signal that the lounge was closing for the night.



Once outside, Jake headed for the parking lot. He was about halfway there when he saw a girl he knew from his history class. She was trying to attach a flyer to one of the bulletin boards, but her stapler kept jamming. Jake was about to go to her rescue when he saw someone dressed in black step out of the shadows.

“Hello, Carol,” Jake heard the guy say. His voice was low and rough.

Carol turned toward him. “Uh—hello. Do I know you?” she asked.

“No, but you will,” the guy said with a smile. Jake noticed how sharp his teeth looked in the moonlight.

He decided to step in. “Hey, there, Carol!” he yelled as he sprinted toward the nervous-looking girl.

Carol turned to see who had called out her name. As Jake got closer, the guy in black quickly pulled back into the shadows.

“Need any help?” Jake asked.

Carol grinned. “You’re my hero!” she said. “I’m having a hard time getting these flyers up. The stapler keeps jamming.” She handed it to him. “What happened to that other guy?” she asked, glancing around.

“Uh—I guess he left,” Jake said.

Carol shrugged. “He was a strange one! I can’t say I’m sorry he’s gone.”

Jake nodded. He glanced at the flyer as he stapled it to the bulletin board. The word MISSING was spelled out in big black letters across the top. Below was the photograph of a handsome young man.

“Who’s this?” Jake asked.

“My—my brother,” Carol said in a shaky voice. “He disappeared about a week ago,” she went on. “I’m hoping someone will recognize his picture and get in touch with me.”

“I’m sorry,” Jake said. “I sure hope he turns up soon.” Wanting to cheer her up, he added, “Probably he just took off on a road trip or something.”

Carol shook her head. “We thought of that. But we’ve talked to all his friends—to

everyone he knows, in fact. No one's seen a sign of him."

Jake frowned. "And your brother was a student here?"

Carol nodded. "You know, it's kind of weird. It seems that several students have gone missing recently."

Jake gazed at her in disbelief. "Really?" he said.

She pointed to other flyers on the bulletin board. Now Jake took a good look at them.

MISSING!
DISAPPEARED!
VANISHED!
Have you seen . . . ?

He took a deep breath. And then it dawned on him. Where was Yolanda?



Jake walked Carol to her car in the parking lot.

“I used to feel safe walking around here at night. But now . . . Don’t you think the campus seems kind of spooky this semester?” she asked.

“I don’t know. This is my first semester here,” Jake said.

“Take my word for it,” Carol said. “Things changed when the semester started. We got a lot of new students like that guy back there—the one who stepped out of the shadows. I had a feeling that he didn’t really have my best interests at heart.”

“None of those kids in black are here during the day,” Jake said. “Only at night. They give me the creeps, too.”

Carol stopped at the next bulletin board to put up another flyer. “And those students aren’t the only new people on campus,” she said. “There are several new instructors and counselors, too. Some of them I like. The